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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the following seven characteristics of effective literature assignments: Simplicity; Relevance; Workability; Capitalizing on Student Interest and Background; Providing Explanations and Modeling; Incorporating Collaboration; and Presenting to Students Meaningful Work. Each characteristic listed in the paper contains a brief overview and description. (NKA)

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Creating Effective Literature Assignments: Principles, Theory, and Oodles of Examples

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Creating Effective Literature Assignments:

Principles, Theory, and Oodles of Examples

Presented by Leila Christenbury and Diana Mitchell for NCTE's Fall Convention,

Baltimore, Maryland, November 16, 2001

Based on *Both Art and Craft: Teaching Ideas That Spark Learning* by Diana and Leila,

published by NCTE (2000)

Seven Characteristics of Effective Literature Assignments

Simplicity

A simple teaching idea is not a simpleminded one but one which has a major thrust and focus. Teaching ideas which rely upon multiple, complex components most of which, necessarily, would be interconnected--can fall apart due to their own elaborate nature. Both teachers and students can get hopelessly confused if a teaching activity has too many parts, too many concepts, too many grading rubrics, too many components. Keeping an idea and its attendant activities simple--and thus central--will make the idea more successful in almost any setting.

Relevance

Relevance is a highly complex topic and, in this context, does not relate to the contemporary or applicable nature of an activity. Relevance is a characteristic which

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means that the activity itself is directly tied to the text or the concept itself. For an example, look at the "Fifty Alternatives to the Book Report" in Chapter Four of *Both Art and Craft*. While the activities are intriguing, note how Diana encourages the use of the activity only if the piece of literature justifies it. Thus, creating a childhood for a character (#3) is only relevant if the main character is an adult, and the social worker's report (#5) should be used only if the literature contains events which might indeed be of interest to such a worker. While this caution may seem self evident, it is often lost when we try to make an otherwise interesting activity fit a piece of literature or when we fixate on a subordinate aspect of the literature and use it as a major springboard for discussion or research.

Workability

Workability is wholly context dependent and involves the chances of the activity being successful in your school setting and with your students. If, for instance, a completely relevant and simply designed activity calls for significant equipment to which you and your students have only partial or even inadequate access, you might want to reconsider the activity.

As an example, if students are to use the Internet extensively to complete an activity and you can only get into the computer lab infrequently, it may be a frustrating assignment for all involved. As another instance, putting students in groups to do a short video is a great idea, but if you and your students have access only to a few camcorders, you will not be happy trying to fulfill the project's expectations. Finally, if students need to obtain materials from outside sources--university library, for instance,

or from a municipal office downtown--and they don't have ready transportation, the activity may fail before it even starts.

Another concern with workability is the attention to student skills. Look, in Chapter Six, at "Creating Thematic Units." Before she even starts the unit, Diana thinks about the skills students would need and lists them for herself and her planning and makes sure that these are attended to beforehand and also within the unit itself. In this way, students are not thrown into activities for which they have no real preparation; anticipating what specific skills are necessary before the students experience success in the unit is smart planning and ensures the workability of a teaching activity.

Capitalizing on Student Interest and Background

It is imperative that any activity which you use in your classroom build on, or even emanate from, student interest and student background. Only if students have some sort of prior knowledge or some sort of interest in acquiring new knowledge will they work and work well. The alternative is presenting students with disconnected information for which they perceive no need and to which they can connect little. If you want your students to work steadily and productively, you must account for and appeal to their interests and their background.

Providing Explanations and Modeling

When we ask students to attempt new or unfamiliar activities, they can often appear reluctant, possibly even uncooperative. What many of us fail to remember is the fear that almost all students have of trying something new--and failing. While part of our job

as teachers is to extend student skill, to nudge them into new territory, we must be willing to give students clear explanations and, when appropriate, specific models of what we want.

Incorporating Collaboration

"None of us is as smart as all of us" is a popular phrase which has much good sense behind it. Collaboration can help students make connections which they otherwise might miss. In addition, our students are generally social creatures, and the opportunity to work with others in the classroom is important for their psychological as well as their intellectual ability. Negotiating with others' points of view, learning to compromise or ask helpful questions, can be some of the most important skills students learn as they work with others in school.

Presenting to Students Meaningful Work

Because it is in the curriculum guide, because we've always done it that way, because I told you so (and Jam the teacher), is not sufficient rationale for students. When students suspect that what they are doing in class is not connected, not important, not significant, they will rarely work at a high level. Thus providing meaningful work--and articulating to your students why it is meaningful--ensures interest and possibly a higher level of quality.

Seven Characteristics of Effective Literature Assignments

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Relevance

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Capitalizing on Student Interest and Background

Providing Explanations and Modeling

Incorporating Collaboration

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